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MUSICAL AND POLITICAL EMOTIONS: LOVE AND ANGER IN WAGNER'S *RING*

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum argues that a decent society should encourage love and devotion to constitutional principles and ideals rather than relying on obedience. According to her, art, especially narrative works, could allow us to develop a form of compassion toward excluded or marginalized groups and help us to overcome some negative emotions such as disgust towards groups of people or non-human animals. The capacity to imagine one's own vulnerability and the suffering of others would fuel democratic debate and thus sustain the stability of democratic institutions. This notion is attractive, but the question is how? How can a Beethoven symphony sustain democratic institutions? There are numerous examples of political exploitation of the 9th *Symphony*, both by democracies and authoritarian regimes. Beethoven's 9th *Symphony* was the most performed musical work during the Nazi era; nowadays, it is the European Anthem. If we take the example of the Wagner operas, which I do deliberately for this lecture with the *Ring*, the case seems even more problematic. This suggests that works of art do not automatically contain the virtue required to support democratic institutions. The emotional content we assign to them may also be dependent on the context of their performance. I will support a view rather similar to that of Martha Nussbaum even if I also consider the possibility of the amoral, subversive, stifling, reactionary nature of some works of art. My approach argues that it is the profound experience of the works themselves, articulated along with debate about the same works of art, that is truly democratic. At best, this combination can lead to new ethical perspectives.

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In my opinion, Martha Nussbaum's view on political emotions cannot be examined independently of her theory of emotions. Drawing on her personal experience, and works of literature and music, she delivers a complex and rich view of the emotions and their relationship to our conception of political and social goods. She argues that emotions have a rich cognitive content and shape our conception of our societies and justice. In *Upheavals of Thought*, first published in 2001, she questions the very nature of emotions: are they impulses that have no connections with our thought, imagination, and appraisals? Are they only bodily movements, objectless feelings of pleasure and pain? Describing her own emotions during her grief following the death of her mother, she claims that emotions are intentional, they are about something. They are directed towards a particular object, and imply thinking about the importance of that object to the person who has the emotion. Despite their apparent versatility, she argues that emotions are forms of judgment ascribed to certain things and persons outside a person's own control, which is of great importance for the person's own flourishing. If emotions involve such judgments, we must consider emotions as part of ethical reasoning.

How does Martha Nussbaum's theory of emotions, with its strong ethical dimension, challenge and inspire the work of a musician? Of an artist? How does her theory take into account – at an urgent level – some ethical questions concerning musical or staged performance? We are used to analysing music in terms of composition, musical performance and the listener's perception. If we accept the ethical dimension of emotions as done by Martha Nussbaum (*Upheavals of Thought*), it becomes necessary to add one more step to this triad. What emotional response does a performance leave an audience with to spark public debate afterwards? An artist must take into account what is happening to the emotions experienced during a performance for the public sphere. I contend that this question should be taken far more seriously by musicians, composers, singers, and stage directors. I will examine this issue from the point of view of a musician, whose daily work it is to analyse musical and theatrical works in order to deliver a convincing interpretation that reflects the richness of the work during the performance. For this, I will concentrate on a very controversial work concerning political emotions: Wagner's *Ring*.

Wagner was a composer, but he also wrote numerous essays and was an avid reader of philosophy. His friendship with Nietzsche is well known, as was his interest in the philosophy of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer whose inspiration we may find in the *Ring*. But Wagner was not himself a philosopher, and there are many conflicting views in his writings. Most notably, we see his defense of

absolute human equality and then we later come to find pages of the cruelest antisemitism. What makes his work particularly salient in the context of a lecture on emotions and musical interpretation is that he was fully aware of the power of musical emotions, for individual auditors and their capacity to embody political ideas. It is advantageous to select an opera because the text confirms that we attribute the right emotion to the music. In purely instrumental works, recognition of an emotion requires musical education or cultural affiliation. Wagner was fully conscious of this potential difficulty. He acknowledges the “unlimited capability of music” that, according to him, was revealed by Beethoven. But he was also concerned about the public and listeners’ limits. In *Opera and Drama*, Wagner argues at length for the clarity of musical motives, associations between words and music. This idea led him to find a new way to associate poetry with music. Every first occurrence of a highly characteristic and easily recognizable motif should occur with the appropriate word, concept or symbol. This method first appears as a model of clarity. But during the 15 hours of the *Ring*, even the implied listener is overwhelmed by the amount of musical motifs. After several hours of music, the 261 musical motives no longer appear with their associated word but as a notion, symbol or emotion of the past that underline and enlighten the sung text.

Let us now consider a few scenes from the *Ring* in which Wagner explores the emotions of Anger and Love. The *Ring* is based on myths from Iceland (*Edda*) and Germany (*Nibelungenlied*). Themes include nature, criticism of the bourgeoisie and capitalism, mythological aspects and magical objects. I will focus on the theme of Love, with its two contrasting aspects: institutional Love, represented by the Goddess of Matrimony, and passionate Love, by the character of Brünnhilde.

Love is the central theme of the *Ring*, as the full disaster that led to the destruction of the world started with the rejection of love for gold. The story of the *Ring* is Wagner’s invention, and this is the first problematic and flawed idea of the *Ring*, namely, that one should choose between love or gold. The opera concludes with what is known as Redemption through Love.

Firstly, Wotan, who is the principal God, tries to govern the world through contracts and treaties but these contracts conflict very quickly with his will and his ideas of a good life. Wotan is in constant conflict between his aspiration for love and freedom, and his wife, who keeps him bound to his signed contracts that he must honor and respect. Wotan is a god but without freedom, bound by commitments. For a God, he shows unusual human ambitions, passionate love, a desire for knowledge, experimentations, a profound paternal love for his many

(illegitimate) sons and daughters, which lead him to face the cruelest dilemmas. He wants to change this situation. To this end, he tries to create free beings who can act independently and establish a stable order in the world. In the magical world of the *Ring*, this means the return of the Ring to the Rheintöchter – nature – and staying away from every temptation for absolute power or wealth. The *Ring* ends with Wotan acknowledging that free beings – the Wälsung, who are humans – are subject to illusions. They have limited comprehension, but profound emotions. Their freedom is not absolute and if they can act freely, they can also act against themselves.

My point now is to show how interpretation is crucial and can generate complete opposite emotions in the spectator. We will observe the distance between an initial reading of the score, an analytical approach, and future staged evolutions. I propose to look at three different interpretations of the *Ring* that have particularly interested me. The first is the *Ring* under the direction of Pierre Boulez and staged by Patrice Chéreau in Bayreuth in 1976. The second is the *Ring* directed by Frank Castorf in Bayreuth in 2016 and conducted by Marek Janowski (premiere in 2013). The last is the most recent, the new *Ring* directed by Dmitry Tcherniakov at the Berlin Staatsoper in 2022 and conducted by Christian Thielemann. I have deliberately left out all the scenes on nature to instead focus on the scenes that are prominent for the evolution of the character of Brünnhilde. This first scene is the fight between Fricka and Wotan at the beginning of Act Two in *Walküre*, in which Fricka explains why Wotan should let his son Siegmund die in a duel.

SECOND ACT WALKÜRE, SCENE FRICKA/WOTAN#

The scene between Fricka and Wotan illustrates two opposing visions of love. Fricka, the goddess of marriage, claims that Hunding should win his duel against Siegmund because he is the legitimate husband. Wotan argues that Hunding and Sieglinde's marriage was loveless "Unheilig acht ich den Eid, der unliebende eint." ("Unholy hold I the oath that binds unloving hearts") (Wagner *Ring des Nibelungen* / Wagner *The Ring* – same for other quotations).

Chéreau shows Fricka's conflicting feelings. She is angry and determined, but we quickly understand that she also defends Hunding as the situation resonates painfully with her own life. Wotan is unfaithful and no longer cares about her. She acts with respect to the laws but seeks intimacy with her husband, who speaks only of free love and new experiences.

In the production by Castorf, the love between them ceased a long time ago. The two gods are angry and this turns into a competition for power. They are both dressed in religious garb and each stick to their own principles. Fricka no longer speaks, she yells because, at the opera, the stage has a huge influence on the music. During her speech, Wotan leaves the stage or hides behind a newspaper titled *Pravda*, which means 'The Truth' in Russian. The meaning is clear: each one knows the truth, the other is wrong and no real discussion or love is possible anymore.

In the newest version directed by Tcherniakov, I really appreciate that all the nuances of emotions are carefully staged, as in the version by Chéreau. Here, as well, the scene is complex. There are principles, but there is an underlying love between Wotan and Fricka. But 2022 is not 1976 and after 40 years of feminism in real life, Wotan is now the one who takes care and attempts to calm his wife. He acts with a lot of gestures of helplessness, runs after her and the audience understands that Fricka does not let him speak. When he can finally open his mouth and sing, all he can say is with manly superiority: "Nichts lerntest du, wollt' ich dich lehren, was nie du erkennen kannst, eh' nicht ertagte die That." ("Nought learnedst thou when I would teach thee what never canst thou discern, till day has dawned on the deed.")

THIRD ACT WALKÜRE. WOTAN, BRÜNNHILDE#

Wotan must accept Fricka's terms from the previous scene. As such, he sends his daughter, Brünnhilde, to take Siegmund to Valhalla, which means to let Siegmund die as a hero. But things do not happen as planned, and Brünnhilde feels for the first time deep feelings that she first connects to the true will of her father. This is a complicated point in the tetralogy. Brünnhilde is bound to Wotan's will, but Wotan gives orders against his will all the time. To honour the contracts, Wotan has to kill Siegmund, his son, himself, and must now punish his favorite daughter Brünnhilde for her disobedience.

Here is the extraordinary musical and theatrical passage where Brünnhilde rises up and explains to her father why she disobeyed. It is one of the best examples of Wagner's complex art for connecting poetry and music. For a lecture on political emotions, it is probably the most moving and relevant passage of the whole *Ring*.

Siegmund muß ich seh'n. Tod kündend trat ich vor ihn, gewährte sein Auge, hörte sein Wort; ich vernahm des Helden heilige Noth; ... **Sieg** oder **Tod** mit **Siegmund** zu

theilen: dies nur erkannt' ich zu kiesen als **Loos**! Der diese **Liebe** mir in's Herz gehaucht, dem Willen, der dem Wälsung mich gesellt, ihm innig vertraut, trotz't' ich deinem Gebot.

(Siegfried I beheld. Death-doom I brought to him there; I looked in his eyes, heard his lament; I discerned the hero's bitter distress; loudly resounded the plaint of the bold one: ... triumph or death to share with Siegmund: that seemed only the lot I could choose! He who this love into my heart had breathed, whose will had placed the Wälsung at my side, true only to him, thy word did I defy.)

For Wagner, not only the meaning of the words was important, but also the sound of the consonant and vowels. Words with the same first consonant had, for him, a very strong relationship and a deep musical meaning. Meaning, sound, letter and harmony are often bound together and form a complex and inexhaustible net of signification. Here, Siegmund is related to the concept of Sieg (victory), while Brünnhilde saw no other option than Tod zu Teilen (sharing death) if Siegmund was not victorious. Wagner creates a tremendous musical tension throughout the passage, culminating in the word Los (Destiny). The tension is always there when the cellos and double basses play a long, slow, low melody, and finally the resolution appears on the word "Liebe" in E Major, while the basses play the 5th of the accord. The resolution appears on the E, the passage note for soprano voices, the most vulnerable in the whole range, while the strings play the theme of Walsungen Love (cf. example 1).

The image displays two pages of musical notation from Wagner's *Walküre*, Act II. The left page features Siegmund's vocal line and piano accompaniment, with a red 'Tension' label and blue arrows pointing to specific musical features. The right page features Brünnhilde's vocal line and piano accompaniment, with a red 'Résolution' label and blue arrows pointing to specific musical features. Both pages include German and French lyrics.

Example 1. Wagner, *Walküre*, "Sieg oder Tod"

There is more at stake here than compassion. Compassion was just the first move, and led Brünnhilde first to save Siegmund and then to help Sieglinde. Brünnhilde is now bound to Siegmund with the deepest love and accepts her father's punishment in the hope that Siegmund and Sieglinde's unborn son, Siegfried, will love her.

In Chéreau's production, *Walküre* ends with the reconciliation between Wotan and Brünnhilde, a moving scene of definitive farewell, because Brünnhilde will no longer live with the gods. In Castorf's production, this is yet another moment of incredible violence. During Brünnhilde's explanation, Wotan moves out of the room again. He refuses to listen. Thanks to a scholarship from Paris Wagner Verband, I saw Castorf's production in Bayreuth. I remember becoming angry most of the time. Looking back at this production for this article, I understand that what I found extremely violent was the constant refusal to engage in dialogue. There is very little interaction between the characters; they can feel deep feelings, like the music still suggests, but these feelings are hidden. But like it or not, we must admit that Castorf is right on one point. It even appears to be an argument against any attempt to rely on emotions for political improvement. The decision-maker has the choice to just turn his back, and in real life this happens all the time.

In Cherniakov's production, *Walküre's* end is an illuminating moment. Wotan overcomes his initial anger. There is still a punishment, but the opera ends with a marvelous scene of joy and enjoyment, oriented towards the future. No magic fire, no deep sleeping, Brünnhilde is now an adult and she has to leave her father's house (a research centre) to find her way into a new life and find love. There are the last moments of Brünnhilde's childhood: she draws flames on the chairs of the conference room of the research centre. She then leaves the building.

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

Now, I will jump to the end of *Götterdämmerung*. After experiencing passionate love with Siegfried, Brünnhilde has extremely stressful experiences. Siegfried, who has lost his memory, falls in love with another woman and forces Brünnhilde, in a scene of crude violence, to marry his new best friend, Gunther. Distressed and traumatized, Brünnhilde recognizes that she has lost everything and that Wotan lied to her. Moved by feelings of retaliation and revenge, she provides Hagen with crucial information that helps him kill Siegfried. At the end

of the opera, she sends the god of the fire, Loge, to Valhalla, where Wotan, now depressed, has already prepared a stake. Valhalla burns, it is the end of the gods.

What happened to Brünnhilde? It seems that one can overcome a terrible injustice, but not the injustice of everybody. As a human now, she has human feelings. She does not understand Siegfried's romantic shift and believes that her father is responsible for the betrayal, which is no less than the explicit scene of rape in the first act of *Götterdämmerung* (whatever Siegfried drank, a magic potion or alcohol). She feels helpless, alone, and shameful. She says to Gunther: "Dich verriet er und mich verriet ihr alle! Wäre ich gerecht, alles Blut der Welt büßte nicht eure Schuld!" ("He betrayed thee; and me ye all are betraying! Were I but just, all the blood of the world could not atone for your guilt!")

What is the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* about? What is the significance of the entire *Ring*? Valhalla is on fire, there are no gods anymore. We hear the motifs of the World Ash Tree, Valhalla, the Wehe Motiv, which turns out to be a Ruhe Motiv, Fire, *Götterdämmerung*, fate, magic fire, the Valkyrie, spear, contracts, the curse of the ring, Erda's motif, the Rheingold, death, and, above all, the now-called Love Redemption, or Brünnhilde's motif, which had only appeared one time before, 8 hours of music previously, as Sieglinde's Motif of gratitude towards Brünnhilde. Compassion, Love, Gratitude, Understanding and Forgiveness are bound together musically. We are dealing with a grandiose end which seems to give way to different interpretations.

I think we can understand this end in two principal ways. They are the two options adopted by Chéreau and Tcherniakov. Chéreau's direction is faithful to an indication of Wagner often overlooked. The choir is supposed to be present on stage at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner's writings on the role of the choir are conflicting. In *Opera and Drama*, he criticizes the use of the choir in the Greek tragedy, but seems to have changed his mind for the end of *Götterdämmerung*. With no more gods, the choir turns into an audience itself, which seems to be invited to deliberate now, by itself. According to this idea, in Chéreau's production, the choir watches Valhalla go up in flames and then turns to the public on the last chords.

One question remains: the question of freedom. The creation of free beings was Wotan's plan. But in an imperfect world, no one appears to be entirely free. Free choices are corrupted by misunderstanding and overwhelming emotions. Does Brünnhilde act freely at the end of *Götterdämmerung* or does she fulfill her father's desire to die and hasten the end of the gods?

I contend that two views are especially relevant to an interpretation of the *Ring*. One is the criticism of society and the aspiration for a better world. Wagner

was an anarchist and the *Ring*'s project seems to be dedicated to proving that laws and contracts come into conflict with human aspirations. Such an aspect of the *Ring* is inexhaustible and can easily give rise to problematic interpretations. Must the true free hero find his way into the world beyond all law and contracts? That appears to be Wotan's first wish. But Siegfried does not want to be just a free man, running through the forest and playing the horn. He falls in love and desires a great friendship. Both clash and lead to his death.

The second perspective is that the *Ring* is a study of emotions. This is Tcherniakov's statement. I am grateful to Christoph Lang, *dramaturg* at the Staatsoper in Berlin, for his enlightening explanations of Cherniakov's direction. The Complete *Ring* is played out like at a Research Institute for Emotion and Violence. This research includes research into human beings, particularly Siegfried. But researchers are not free from emotions, and Brünnhilde falls in love with Siegfried who is unable, due to his traumatic childhood, to truly love her. Then, based on her experience of emotions, Brünnhilde's words addressed to her father Wotan after Siegfried's death, echo precisely this:

O ihr, der Eide ewige Hüter!
 Lenkt euren Blick auf mein blühendes Leid; erschaut eure ewige Schuld! (...)
 Weiß ich nun was dir frommt?
 Alles, Alles, Alles weiß ich, Alles ward mir nun frei.
 (Oh ye, of vows the heavenly guardians!
 Turn now your eyes on my grievous distress; behold your eternal disgrace!
 ... He, truest of all, must betray me, that wise a woman might grow!
 Know I now all thy need?
 All things, all things, all now know I.
 All to me is revealed.)

At the end of Tcherniakov's staging, Brünnhilde leaves the research centre and the words of Wagner's first version of *Götterdämmerung* appear on the background.

“nicht mehr nach Walhalls Feste, wisst ihr, wohin ich fahre?
 ... Trauernder Liebe tiefstes Leiden schloss die Augen mir auf: enden sah ich die Welt.”
 “Deepest suffering of Grieving love opened my eyes: end I saw the world.”
 She leaves a world of desire and illusions.

This is the end of the *Ring* and the end of the experience of emotions. And the audience's emotions? Loud boos and applause. This is what we usually hear after a five-hour show on the day of the premiere: Love and Anger. Backstage, it resonates with our feelings of joy that we have succeeded in bringing something new to the stage. It echoes with the feeling that not everything was perfect, that

there is still room for improvement. For a work like the *Ring*, we recognize that many questions still remain unanswered.

The boos are generally directed toward the interpretation. We usually think of it as coming from a conservative part of the audience. But I think we are mistaken in thinking that this is just a conservative reaction. Interpretation is, in itself, questionable. We find an interesting view in Susan Sontag's article "Against Interpretation", in which she considers that the need for interpretation "presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demand of (later) readers." (6) According to her, interpretation is "a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought to be too precious to repudiate it, by revamping it." (6) This is a powerful argument that we find in many articles in the papers about new lyrical productions. The questions asked are, very frequently, where is the ring, where are the giants, where is the Rhine, where is Valhalla?

If we are talking about art and political emotions, we cannot think that listening carefully to a piece of music is sufficient, although listening leads to profound self-examination. We cannot simply select works of art that correspond to our concept of the good, nor can we deliberately prohibit old works. We cannot develop new interpretations of the work simply to make the old repertoire more acceptable to modern audiences, or to stage old erroneous prejudices. So what is the right way to make music? In French, "juste" means both correct, without mistake, and rightful, in the sense of Justice. What is, then, *une interprétation juste*? An interpretation that respects the original text and addresses issues of justice, in the moral sense of the term. I think that Chéreau and Tcherniakov's interpretations are both right and "just". But what we really need is to deliberate with the audience and discuss the performance. It is not just the work which helps us to develop our emotions or our thoughts, it is the perpetual questions about the work. In *Poetic Justice*, Martha Nussbaum claims that we have to exercise our critical thinking when we choose works and that we have to exercise and compare our reasoning in cooperation with others. Not only is the artist's experience important for democracy, but also for the playful dialogue between the work and the public, between new ideas and the prejudices of the past.

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